

Let's Talk Tactics

Lieutenants as First-Line Tacticians

CAPTAIN KEVIN S. PETIT

The Army has a great need for junior officers with a good understanding of tactics. We need lieutenants who can provide their superiors and subordinates with solid military options, recommendations, and analysis. These lieutenants should be skilled technicians and tested leaders, adaptable, knowledgeable of military history, and versed in the language of the art. In short, commanders must develop lieutenants to be the battlefield's first-line tacticians.

To teach tactics, we need to implement programs in our units that bring the lieutenants together periodically to *talk* tactics.

The purpose of these sessions should

be to provide the familiarity and competence that lead to confidence. This officer professional development (OPD) process must go beyond classes in writing an operation order. It should also go beyond simply teaching how infantry, artillery, and armor work together to attain a designated objective or end state. It will take time, study, and practice.

The best teacher of tactics is experience. There is no substitute for being in the field, under arms, freezing and sweating. But gaining tactical experience exclusively in the field can be slow, painful, and expensive. Likewise, the standard training cycle of a typical

unit offers woefully few opportunities for lieutenants to make battlefield decisions. In a low-budget environment, lieutenants cannot wait for experience to catch up with their need to know tactics. Commanders must create opportunities for discussion and the exchange of ideas to develop tactical sense in young officers.

The following discussion is a sample training path that will help you, as a unit commander, improve the tactical abilities of your junior officers:

The Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB). A study of tactics must begin with developing the enemy situation. The IPB is the analytical

method of reducing uncertainties about the enemy situation. It integrates enemy doctrine with the weather and terrain to determine and evaluate enemy capabilities and vulnerabilities. From these enemy characteristics, planners determine what enemy courses of action (COAs) are feasible and probable. Once settled upon the way the enemy will fight, we can begin to develop friendly COAs to defeat him. It is imperative that the red graphics (enemy) go on the map before the blue graphics (friendly).

A solid, detailed IPB allows the planner to focus his effort. When templating of an enemy platoon position, include likely observation posts, probable security patrol routes, obstacles, escape or counterattack routes, command and logistics nodes, machinegun and other automatic weapon positions, and antiarmor or antiaircraft gun positions, to name a few. Do not be satisfied with an enemy platoon graphic placed on a hilltop. Reject enemy templates that say, "Seven to ten enemy soldiers in the building." Well, is it seven, or is it ten? The difference is significant: Seven men may mean an ordinary infantry squad is defending a building. Doctrine indicates allocating one friendly platoon against this threat. Ten men, however, may be an infantry squad protecting a heavy machinegun team—a lethal threat that may require the allocation of two friendly platoons.

The IPB, therefore, must be detailed and specific. Leaders should create an environment in which lieutenants are not afraid of being "wrong." The IPB is a continuous process that requires constant refinement. Speculation is necessary to progress in the planning, provided it proceeds methodically and is based upon *probabilities*, not *possibilities*.

Terrain Analysis. After World War II, terrain analysis became a central theme for cadets and officers. Topographical drawings, terrain walks, and map-reading instruction continue today in the Army's schoolhouses. The ability to read a map, to see the terrain through its symbols and elevation lines, is increasing with technology, but there is no substitute for constant study.

During periods in the field, marksmanship ranges, and the company area, junior officers should create terrain models. Commanders should begin by asking, "What is the best way of moving a military force through this terrain?" Soon, they will ask, "What is the best way to organize this terrain for a combined arms defense?" Logisticians, communicators, and administrators ought to share in the exercise.

The classic account of how to organize a piece of military terrain is found in *The Defence of Duffer's Drift*, by British Major General Sir Ernest D. Swinton when he was a captain, shortly after the Boer War at the beginning of this century. A succession of bad decisions and resultant calamitous defeats occurs in the dreams of a lieutenant fighting in that war. This treatise on hills and valleys for gun positions, fields of fire,

To teach tactics, we need to implement programs in our units that bring the lieutenants together periodically to talk tactics.

obstacles and enemy avenues of approach should be required reading for lieutenants.

Instruction in terrain analysis should begin with the military aspects of terrain, or OCOKA (observation and fields of fire, cover and concealment, obstacles and movement, key terrain, and avenues of approach). Once familiar with this information, junior officers can go on to match terrain with the capabilities of weapons and formations.

History Strengthens. Many who have achieved success in the military profession have testified to the utility of studying military history. General Douglas MacArthur constantly used historical examples to underscore his point of view. General Walter Krueger, as a young officer, translated books and articles from German literature. Early in his career, General Dwight Eisenhower spent countless hours listening to Brigadier General Fox Conner on the lessons that could be learned from military history. General George Marshall, while a student at Fort Leaven-

worth, reconstructed Civil War campaigns from after-action reports. General George Patton took the time in 1943 to read about the Norman conquest of Sicily nine centuries earlier and ponder the "many points in common with our operations." Likewise, General Robert Eichelberger summoned from memory a passage on Cold Harbor from Grant's *Memoirs* and thereby stiffened his own resolve to press the attack at Buna.

Historical examples add interest and realism to the study of tactics. To complement a lesson on the dangers of tactical shortcomings, recount the failings of Austrian General Mack von Leiberich, who was defeated by his own indecision at the hands of Napoleon at Ulm. A lesson on timidity is best illustrated by Confederate General Gideon Pillow's flight from Fort Donelson shortly before its surrender to General Ulysses Grant in 1862. When teaching maneuver, describe Field Marshal Alfred von Schlieffen's theory of envelopment or Captain B. H. Liddell Hart's strategy of the indirect approach. Teach history to generate interest and curiosity in tactics and its application. Emphasize not the details of a particular battle, but rather the overall views of the Great Captains of battle. Examine the conditions under which the leaders made decisions, and learn to think in the same manner.

When used properly, history is a powerful tool in teaching tactics. It is an understanding and an appreciation of tactical experience that we seek, and history develops a great reservoir of that experience.

Introduce the Maneuver Warfare Argument. The maneuver versus firepower and attrition debate is an excellent vehicle for promoting tactical discussion. Regardless of personal inclinations, the academic argument has instructional tactical value. Lieutenants should be introduced to the tenets and terms of this controversial theory.

Auftragstaktik, *Schwerpunkt* and *Aufrollen* are also terms and concepts that all junior officers should know. Discuss with them the concept of the "Center of Gravity." Illustrate how "soft spot tactics" and the idea of "surfaces and gaps"

allow planners to attack the enemy's weaknesses and avoid his strengths. Examine Liddell Hart's analogy of maneuver when expressed as an expanding torrent. Question the practicability of accepting confusion and disorder and, while trying to operate within it, imposing it upon the enemy. Deliberate the importance of speed to the maneuver theory and whether speed really is, in fact, security.

Our lieutenants do not need to be able to defend the theory. They only need to recognize important characteristics about the model, identify the false analogies and oversimplifications, and question the selected historical examples that typically "prove" the case. Similarly, the lieutenants ought to ascertain the strengths of the theory. A few important points lieutenants should learn from the study are that men, not machines, win wars, that battlefield decentralization is important, and that leadership and initiative must be emphasized.

As a teacher, closely monitor the discussion, but do not try to settle the argument. Your goal is merely to generate intelligent tactical discussion. Logical thinking and tactical reasoning will spring naturally from even the most elementary instruction on maneuver warfare.

Tactical Decision Games (TDGs). TDGs are a simple, interesting, and effective way to improve decisionmaking and tactical insight. Let lieutenants assume the role of commander. Provide a map or blown-up portion of a map and read a short tactical situation. The situation should be deliberately terse, because dealing with uncertainty is one of the fundamental challenges of decisionmaking.

Within an established time limit, force the lieutenants to decide what action must be taken and to communicate that action in the form of orders to subordinates. On the map or terrain sketch, require an overlay for the concept of the operation. Allow lieutenants to explain what options existed, what factors warranted consideration, and what was foremost in the commander's mind, and then to defend *why* they chose a certain course of action. They

need not be "right," but they should be able to defend their solutions intelligently from their understanding of tactical principles.

What TDGs are intended to develop is what Frederick the Great called *coup d'oeil*, which literally means "strike of the eye," or a rapid and comprehensive glance. Frederick described it as *the talent which great men have of conceiving in a moment all the advantages of the terrain and the use they can make of it with their army...the cleverer general perceives the advantages of the [situation] instantly...Whoever has the best coup d'oeil will perceive at first glance the weak spot of the enemy and attack him there.*

The tactician gifted with *coup d'oeil* sees patterns and opportunities on the battlefield where others may see only chaos and confusion. This "strike of the eye" brings into focus all the tactician's knowledge and experience, and it sets in motion a series of quick decisions concerning how and where to deploy forces.

The Germans also have a word for this phenomenon, *Fingerspitzengefuehl*, which literally means "finger-tip feeling" and refers to the instinctive sense of matching terrain with doctrine and weaponry. Regardless of the term, tactical insight and creativity occur after the mind has been well honed and stocked with facts and ideas. TDGs are an excellent vehicle for achieving this tactical sense.

Course of Action Development at the Company Level. Troop leading procedures at the company level are, to some extent, an art. Field Manual (FM) 7-10, *The Infantry Rifle Company*, discusses the deliberate planning process but does not tailor it well to company level planning. The manual suggests that the company commander develop "two or three courses of action." It suggests that the company executive officer may be used to develop courses of action (COAs) only if the commander's planning time is limited. Likewise, the manual states that the executive officer "may assist" with the wargaming effort.

Company commanders who receive a battalion operations order and close

their doors, asking not to be disturbed, are planning inefficiently and missing a developmental opportunity. COA development for company schemes of maneuver can and should be done at the company level. Given guidance, lieutenants can develop COA sketches and statements for impending company operations. Lieutenants who are skilled in TDGs will make an easy transition to formulating and briefing COAs. This is an efficient and effective way to teach tactics and streamline planning at the company level.

Ultimately, lieutenants will implement what a company commander wants done in the field. The company commander formulates his plan on the basis of, among many things, the battalion commander's intent. The battalion commander sets forth in his intent his vision of the outcome of the action. But the battalion commander cannot proceed on the unreasonable assumption that all officers have had similar developmental experiences.

To increase the professional competence of junior officers, we must broaden our own experiences and hence our competence. Instruction begins with service schooling, but it must go beyond the memorization of the principles of war and the five paragraphs of an operations order. Commanders need to combine service school instruction with a self-study program and OPDs to advance the competence of their junior officers. They must treat tactics first as an academic subject, then train it in the field. Leaders can set the conditions and encourage self improvement through guidance, education, and developmental opportunities.

In short, by talking tactics, we can develop our lieutenants into first-line tacticians. These are the officers we need in our army, and we cannot afford to believe we are producing them when, in fact, we are not.

CPT Kevin S. Petit commands Company A, 3d Battalion, 75 Ranger Regiment. He previously commanded a company in the 82d Airborne Division and led a platoon in 3-325 Airborne Battalion Combat Team. He is a 1989 graduate of the United States Military Academy and holds a master's degree in military studies.
